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SUBJECT: MAYSAN ON THE EVE OF PIC

Classified By: PRT Maysan Team Leader Julie Nutter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Maysan cable.

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Summary  
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¶1. (S) Recent intelligence assessments have described Maysan province as ripe for continued violence, despite the imminence of transition to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC). Maysan's history of inter-militia and inter-tribal warfare sets the backdrop for this assessment. However, there is a new element that bodes ill for provincial security. According to UK military sources, the Maysan Provincial Council has narrowed the choices for its new police chief to three individuals, and chances are good that the new police chief will be affiliated with the Badr Corps, the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The fierce fighting that broke out last fall in Al Amarah was touched off by pitched battles between the Jaish Al Mahdi (JAM) and Badr, ceasing only when a Baghdad-appointed emergency security committee intervened. We expect that if a Badr-backed police chief is named, the potential for continued violence will intensify.

¶2. (S) Added to this, the potential for violence is exacerbated in Maysan by political, economic, and geographical factors. One of the poorest provinces in the country, it has a turbulent history and has been the scene of repeated conflicts. Its political relations with Coalition Forces, particularly with the British, have been tenuous and episodic. Many Maysanis will at first see the PIC handover as a step closer to ejecting the Coalition, but the continued UK presence conducting border operations will mute that elation. By all accounts, JAM is currently in charge of Maysan and operates almost without constraint, but the continued threat of Badr rivalry keeps tensions high. Provincial politicians are keen to start exploiting the province's reportedly rich oil and gas fields, but competing claims over who controls assets will be a source of friction., as will the presence of a significant displaced population and generally poor economic conditions. Finally,

substantial political and economic ties to Iran, and alleged official Iranian interference in Maysan will foment instability.  
End Summary.

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Crossroads of Conflict  
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13. (C) Maysan is one of the most independent-minded provinces of Iraq, and the combination of Shia inter-militia competition, Iranian historical influence, and tribalism provide a witch's brew of instability for a province on the eve of Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC). Almost all of the province's roughly 800,000 inhabitants are Shia Muslim, perhaps two-thirds of whom have tribal affiliations. Almost half of the province's population lives in the capital, Al Amarah, which itself is almost three times as large as Majar Al Kabir, the second most-populous city. Like its neighbors Wasit and Basrah, Maysan has long experience chafing as a crossroads of conflict. It was a battleground during the Iran-Iraq War and suffered the anger of Saddam after the Shia uprising in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm. It had also been a scene of conflict for the British, including during World War 1, the Tribal Revolt of 1920, and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). During the opening days of the OIF ground campaign, Maysan's tribal leaders "liberated" the province,

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reportedly one of the first areas in Iraq to do so. Today, Maysan distinguishes itself as a major transit point for weapons smuggled from Iran to Iraq, particularly the lethal explosively-formed penetrators (EFPs).

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Bumpy Official Relations with Coalition Forces  
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14. (C) The province's relations with Coalition Forces (CF) have been bumpy, with security incidents and political irritants leading provincial officials to often "disengage" for periods of time, while retaining informal connections largely through the Governor's office. One operation in particular (codenamed Operation Dorado) led to the longest period of disengagement, when UK forces detained reputed militia members during limited anti-insurgent raids. As a result, provincial officials cut off contact and effectively mobilized local press attention against CF, using video footage of a 2004 beating by British soldiers of Al Amarah youth demonstrating for jobs to punctuate the claims of abuse.

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PIC: A Symbolic Ejection of the Coalition  
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15. (C) The effect of PIC in Maysan will be another symbolic step toward the complete removal of CF, which had started with the British withdrawal from Camp Abu Naji in early autumn 2006.

However, the elation is likely to be muted, since the UK will continue border operations. According to British military sources, the PIC Memorandum of Understanding authorizes the UK-led battle group - at current strength - to remain in Maysan, working alongside the Iraqi Department for Border Enforcement. (Comment: Border enforcement is considered a federal function, allowing the British recourse to central - not provincial - authorities in case of difficulties.) We anticipate continued militia activity and some militia-backed tribal activity against the border patrols, since tribal leaders as well as militias profit from border smuggling. End Comment.)

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JAM in the Driver's Seat - For Now  
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¶6. (S) Since proving itself the stronger military force during the October battles between JAM and the Badr Corps, JAM and JAM-sympathetic politicians have gained control of major power centers in Maysan. One recent intelligence report noted that black-uniformed JAM members openly carry weapons during patrols in Al Amarah. The report also noted that JAM has taken over the police stations and even the local cell phone service provider, Asia Communications. They are reportedly closely connected to the Shia tribes, including the Al Muhammad' Awi tribe.

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Pending Police Appointment: A Trigger for More Violence?  
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¶7. (S) According to recent intelligence reporting, Maysan's Provincial Council has voted to appoint a new Provincial Director of Police (PDOP), and three recommended names have been short listed and forwarded to the GOI Ministry of the Interior for a final decision. There is reportedly a strong possibility that a Badr-sympathetic individual could emerge from this process, an eventuality that would certainly antagonize the dominant JAM

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forces and possibly precipitate a repeat of the sectarian bloodshed seen in Al Amarah in October 2006.

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A Poor Province  
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¶8. (C) Maysan is one of Iraq's poorest provinces and suffers one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Its economic difficulties are structural, and the quality and availability of infrastructure and basic services are barely adequate. The demand for electricity is three times the supply, potable water is available to about 60 percent of the population, and the availability of health services is among the worst in Iraq. There have been considerable numbers of returnees, both from outside of Iraq and from within. The arrival of internally displaced people seeking refuge in a very poor province like

Maysan is another destabilizing combination that will strain the capabilities of the provincial government. (Comment: One person explained that in the mid-1970s, financial incentives were offered by the government to people willing to relocate to Baghdad. Many Maysanis with tribal connections took this opportunity and settled in (what is today) Sadr City, laying roots and raising families there. Many of these still retain close ties to family in Maysan, occasionally visiting and providing support to them. Today, many such people from Sadr City are reportedly sheltering in the province during Operation Fard Al Qanoon. End Comment.)

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Oil and Investment Aspirations  
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¶9. (C) The rich and as yet unexploited provincial oil and gas fields represent the heart's desire of Maysani politicians. The GOI has reportedly extended invitations to foreign firms to initiate drilling of 50 wells in the province, a move that would expand oil supply capacity in the rich southern fields. (Comment: As an indication of Maysani enthusiasm about resource extraction, the provincial crest on the letterhead of stationery that we receive from them contains a large, flaring derrick, underscored by an arm holding a sword.) However, the fight for control of Maysan's possible riches could be the source of more bloodshed, as militias and tribal groups compete among themselves for control of assets and perhaps eventually (depending on the final draft of the Hydrocarbon Law) for a share of oil revenues.

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Corruption - A Source of Political Instability?  
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¶10. (C) Added to these factors, the current Maysan government is attracting notice within the province for reportedly skimming off profits from reconstruction as well as cross-border trade. Tribal leaders, both those affiliated with militias and relatively independent sources such as Abu Muslim have identified the Governor and his staff as increasingly corrupt. Corruption could become a convenient excuse for rival militias and some of their tribal affiliates to replace the JAM-backed Governor, whether the charges are warranted or not, and the ferment could be another source of continued instability. The Governor will feel increasingly embattled, particularly with provincial elections in the offing.

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Big Brother Across the Border  
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¶11. (C) Iran casts a long shadow across Maysan. An extensive shared border, profound cultural and religious affinities,

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family connections, and centuries of trade with Iran have made it a

natural support structure, reaching far, far beyond simply the provision of EFPs or other lethal aid. Iranian companies are active in the province and the cross-border import-export business is thriving, much as it has for centuries.

(Comment:

While we have been unable to characterize the scope of the official Iranian presence in Maysan, we expect that it is pervasive. It is not uncommon for our interlocutors in the government, including the Governor, to travel there for business or pleasure, and to regularly accuse the Iranian intelligence service of interference in the province. End Comment.)

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Conclusion  
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¶12. (S) While provincial authorities will seek to spin PIC transfer as testimony of their governing acumen, JAM and the people they influence will see it as another milestone on the road to concentrated militia power in the south. We anticipate an increase in JAM-Badr violence, particularly if a Badr-sympathetic Police Director is named. This could go beyond the scale of the October 2006 conflict, if JAM seeks to press its advantage and consolidate its gains unimpeded by CF. With the reported widespread penetration of the local police by JAM and arms support by Iran to both militias, this may herald a new era of instability in Maysan. The real challenge to the GOI is whether it can face this potential scenario head on, or whether it will allow Maysan to continue to its tradition, forged over many decades, of violent independence from central control.  
CROCKER